

## **Challenges of Mother Tongue Education in Selected Primary Schools in Nandi County, Kenya**

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**Abstract:** This study sought to investigate the challenges faced in mother tongue education in selected Primary schools in Nandi County, in the Republic of Kenya. Mother tongue education is usually taken as a basic human right, but despite the importance of this education myriad of problems bedevil its execution. Challenges in mother tongue education have not only been reported in many fora in Nandi County but also elsewhere in Kenya; however, no systematic study has been carried out to document these challenges, their nature and their causes. The main objective of the study was to find out the challenges of mother tongue education in Nandi County and the possible solutions to these challenges. The study adopted a case study design against a backdrop of mother tongue theory by Butzkamm (2000) which advances the argument that mother tongue education forms the basis of a child's acquisition of knowledge, additional languages and self-expression. This theory is built on the foundations of arguments raised by Tangas and Toukomaa (1976) claiming that a certain threshold of first language competence is needed for second language learning. A stratified random sample of 20 Head teachers, 20 lower Primary School Teachers, and 5 education officials was drawn from selected schools in Chesumei sub-County in Nandi County. The main instruments of data collection were structured and semi-structured questionnaires. Data was organized and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The study identified three major challenges facing the implementation of mother tongue education in Nandi County namely: attitude of education stakeholders; teacher related factors and lack of instructional materials. The results of this study are expected to benefit scholars in applied linguistics, ministry of education and policy makers in education.

**Keywords:** Mother tongue, First language, official language, National language.

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Gathiora [1] Kenya is a multilingual and multiethnic country with an estimated 40 million people who speak about 50 languages and dialects but with estimates ranging from 3 to 70 languages. Gathiora [2] further observes that dialect boundaries tend to be obscured when culture or ethnicity is used as criteria for language and dialect delimitation rather than linguistic criteria of structure or typology. People with common culture may end up being grouped as speaking a similar language but with different dialects as opposed to them being grouped as having different languages [2]. The language versus dialect problem in Kenya can further be illustrated by the Abaluyia sub-tribes who share common culture, beliefs and practices and being identified as speakers of the Luhya language, yet speak a cluster of closely related language, estimated to be 16 to 26, rather than the same language [3]. Other examples include the Kalenjins, who are identified as a single community yet comprise about ten different ethnic groups: Kipsigis, Nandi, Pokot, Marakwet, Keiyo, Tugen, Sabaot, Terik,

Sengwer, each with its own dialect and some, mutually unintelligible. In addition, the Mijikenda community is made up of nine different ethnic groups – the Kauma, Chonyi, Jibana, Giriama, Kamabe, Rabai, Duruma, and Digo [4].

The Kenyan languages as diverse as they are recognized in the localities where they are spoken and in the Kenyan constitution as the primary medium of each individual child's speech. The Language Policy (LP) in Kenya further recognizes a child's mother tongue in the first few years of schooling. This policy is based on the Ministry of Education (MOE) policy of 1976 which stated that the language of instruction in classes 1-3 should be the language of the school's catchment area until class 4 after which English would be the main language of instruction (LOI) [5]. The policy recommends that learners should be taught in the language they speak at home; and those in mixed ethnic background be taught in Kiswahili. The benefits of using a child's home language are acknowledged as useful for the establishment of basic language skills

which can then be transferred to the learning of English and Kiswahili. This was a constructivist approach, as the policy intended to help learners make sense of new information and skills by utilizing previous knowledge [5, 6].

Although the benefits of mother tongue education are clear, the implementation of mother tongue policy is thought to be complex [7]. Practical issues are often reported to include the absence of suitable teaching materials, the fact that teachers are often not proficient in teaching literacy in the local language, and the presence of more than one shade of the same language group in the same classroom [8]. A cross-sectional survey by the Ministry of Education in 2013 conducted in Nandi County indicated that very few schools in the county are using Mother Tongue as the language of instruction (LOI) in the early school years. The factors cited for non-conformance to the Language Policy (LP) and which are authenticated in the current study included: lack of instructional materials of mother tongue; negative attitude of parents to mother tongue education due to ignorance and mix of language/dialects in the county [9].

Nandi County is dominated by the Nandi dialect spoken by the majority of the local population. However, there are the other Kalenjin dialects including Terik, Kipsigis, among others. There are also speakers of non-Kalenjin languages including Abaluhya, Kisii, and Kikuyu among others. In Nandi County, implementation of mother tongue education is perceived to have been a difficult task but no appraisal of mother tongue education has ever been carried out in this County. In addition, a mix of ethnic groups such as Kapkangani inhabits some areas in the county, Serem, Kapsengere, Kamwega and Kipkarren with different language communities include Luhya, Abagusii, Kikuyu, Somali, among others, making implementation of mother tongue education difficult.

### **The concept of mother tongue Education**

The origin of the term “Mother tongue” is drawn from the fact that linguistic skills of a child are developed by the mother and therefore refers to the language spoken by the mother would be the primary language that the child would learn [10]. In some countries such as Kenya, India and various East Asian Countries, mother tongue or native language is used to indicate the language of one’s ethnic group. Mother tongue can be used interchangeably with the words like native language, first language, or mother language [11].

Besides, mother tongue is defined by UNESCO [11] as the language which a person acquire in early years and which becomes their natural instrument of thought and communication [12]. In Kenya, the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE), defines mother tongue as the first language a child is expected

to learn or the language of the school’s catchment area [13]. Furthermore, mother tongue education is a curriculum that teaches students in their mother tongue or first language rather than using the mainstream language, which may be unknown to pupils [13]. According to UNESCO [11], Mother Tongue education is Education, which used is medium of instruction as person’s mother tongue. i.e the language a person has acquired in early years and which normally has become his/her natural instrument of thought and communication [12].

In general, mother tongue can be defined and classified based on the following: origin, that is the languages one learned first; internal identification, that is, the languages one identifies with/as a speaker of; external identification, that is the language(s) one is identified with /as a speaker of, by others, competence, that is the languages(s) one knows best; and function; that is, the languages one uses most [10].

### **Language policy (LP) in Kenya**

Language policy (LP) refers to all the language practices, beliefs and management decisions of a community or policy [14]. Language, therefore, determines which languages should get status and priority in society by being labeled, standard; official “local” “national”, and so on. (LP) has the potential to legitimize marginalized languages and therefore manipulates and imposes the language behavior [15]. Missionaries started formal education in Kenya in 1846 with the setting up of a school in Rabai, a town along the coast. Early language policies in education encouraged the use of mother tongues as local languages were used in the communication of religious messages, missionaries were convinced people better understood if it was taught in vernacular languages [16].

However, the Ministry Of Education set the official language policy in Kenya in 1976. The policy stated that the languages of instruction in classes 1-3 should be the language of the school’s catchment area until class 4 after which English would be the main LOI [5]. The MOE notes that the policy would work as follows: learners who come from a common ethnic community within the neighborhood of the school be taught in the language they speak at home; those with mixed ethnic background are taught Kiswahili as their mother tongue. Further to this, Kiswahili has been given the status of the national language in Kenya’s new constitution promulgated in 2010 [17]. The LP also stated that those schools in urban areas should use English as their LOI as it would be used widely where such learners were from [5].

The 1976 national language policy warns that should the country not fully implement the policy, it risks; high repetition rates; lack of national unity as some communities will feel marginalized; alienation of

learners from their heritage culture, home, community and parents, higher rates of crime, alcoholism and suicides, underutilization of human resources; and loss of linguistic and cultural diversity, among others. The 1976 language policy is still Kenya's current official language – in-education policy of Kenya [5, 3].

### **The use of English and Kiswahili in Kenya**

Kenya's constitution aptly states that the national language of the republic is Kiswahili while the official languages of the republic are Kiswahili and English. In addition, the constitution shall promote and protect the diversity of the language of the people of Kenya and promote the development and use of indigenous languages, among others [17]. The study findings supported this argument especially since the constitution, being the supreme law in the land, supports the promotion and protection of the diversity of the languages spoken in Kenya. In Kenya, as with a number of other countries across Africa, a majority of her children goes through an education that sometimes fails to provide instruction in the child's mother tongue and the language the child understands best. Most schools implement a form of submersion that teaches children in second language rather than the language they speak at home and has been compared to forcibly holding a child under water. In this scenario children first have to gain familiarity with the new sounds in the second language before they can master the symbol. Such cognitive development takes time. Reports cited in Nandi County point to nonconformity to the mother tongue policy in Kenyan schools. The reasons given are far from clear and research was needed to authenticate these claims. Discouraging the use of vernacular and other challenges affecting the implementation of mother tongue policy in many places such as in Chesumei Sub-County primary school result in school leavers who can hardly read and write in the Nandi language. The extent and severity of the problem has not been documented in a credible research. In this regard, this research sought to identify challenges faced in the implementation of mother tongue policy in Chesumei Sub County, Nandi County and examine possible solutions to the challenges faced in mother tongue policy implementation in Chesumei Sub County, Nandi County

According to Butzkamm [18], the mother tongue is used to think, to communicate, and to acquire knowledge. The mother tongue is seen as the master key to other languages. The mother tongue is the foundation for subsequent learning of other languages. The Threshold Theory of Language Acquisition by Tangas and Toukomaa [19] proposed the threshold level hypothesis, which states that only when children have reached a threshold of competence in their first language can they successfully learn a second language without losing competence in both languages. Further, only when a child has crossed a second threshold of competence in both languages will the child's

bilingualism positively affect intellectual development, a state which they called additive bilingualism.

Tangas and Toukomaa [19] developed the threshold level hypothesis after they found that Finnish children who migrated to Sweden and were required to start school using Swedish before they had become sufficiently competent in Finnish showed weaker school performance and lower competence in both Swedish and Finnish. They characterized this low competence in both the first and second languages as semi-lingualism, explaining that if the child's first language is insufficiently developed, the foundation for L2 would be lacking. In their study, Finnish migrant children who started school in Sweden after they were highly competent in their first language and could continue to develop their first language abilities as they learned their second language attained high levels of competence in both languages and were successful in school. Building on these findings, Cummins [20] formulated an "interdependence hypothesis" asserting that second language competence depends upon the level of development of L1.

Cummins distinguished between two kinds of language mastery: Interpersonal communication refers to oral communication skills that are used in everyday situations, while cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) is achieved when the speaker can use language in decontextualized ways including writing, permitting the use of the language as a cognitive tool. Cummins argues that if learners have achieved CALP in L1, this competence can be transferred to L2, permitting them to participate successfully in academic learning in L2. If, however, learners have not achieved CALP in L1, both academic learning and second language learning are adversely affected. Accordingly, Cummins recommends beginning general academic instruction in the child's mother tongue until the child has become highly competent i.e., has achieved CALP in L1. teachers to hold children's understandings of context in a central place in teaching and learning. Indeed, none of the hypotheses reviewed here have been conclusively supported by empirical research. Studies seem to confirm the threshold level hypothesis and the interdependence hypothesis, but existing research is based on small sample sizes. Most children who arrive at school with some competence in more than one language have grown up bilingual or multilingual from their earliest days at home, and have not experienced successive acquisition of second or third languages. Many studies have shown that children can learn three or more languages starting in their early years. Moreover, with sufficient motivation, exposure, periods of formal study, and opportunities for practice, they can ultimately succeed in attaining proficiency in several languages. The theory is grounded on the principle that children can learn well if they are taught in the language, they understand best before proceeding to

other languages. The concept of threshold must first be met before effective learning can take place.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a case study design where educational data was organized, looked, and studied as a whole [21]. The design was appropriate since it describes the variables to be studied in context and holistically hence bringing out the topic of study clearly. In addition, the researcher was able to bring out the unique features of mother tongue education and its influence in second language learning that are specific to the selected schools in Nandi County. The study was conducted in selected schools in Chesumei sub County in Nandi County. A stratified random sampling technique was used for sampling respondents. A sample of 20 Head teachers, 20 lower Primary School Teachers, and 5 Officials from the County Education office were interviewed. The researcher used both a structured and a semi-structured questionnaire as the main instruments of data collection. Data collection instruments are tools used to collect the information from the intended target population. In the study the respondents were given time to complete the questionnaires before collecting them for analysis. The questionnaires contained both the structured and semi-structured questions. Data was organized and presented using descriptive statistics. The information was further presented in tables and percentages.

## **STUDY FINDINGS**

The study revealed a number of challenges faced in the implementation of Mother Tongue education in Chesumei Sub County. The first factor identified was attitude of the education stakeholders. In this study, the attitude of both teachers and parents was cited as a critical factor in the implementation of mother tongue education. It was revealed the attitude of the two categories of stakeholders greatly affected the implementation of mother tongue education in Chesumei Sub County. 80% of the respondents agreed that the attitude of teachers affected the implementation of mother tongue education as compared to only 20% who cited the attitude of parents as a hindrance to the implementation of mother tongue education. In general, teachers were found to affect the implementation of mother tongue education and therefore negative attitude of teacher towards the use of mother tongue is a great impediment to the implementation of mother tongue education. The study further revealed that most parents perceived that the use of mother tongue in instruction is a backward practice that needs to be discarded. On the other hand, 75% of the lower primary school teachers who participated in the study indicated they were not willing to teach mother tongue if given that opportunity.

Secondly, the study revealed that teacher related factors also affected the implementation of mother tongue education. The factors identified in Chesumei Sub County were teacher competence and

proficiency in the local language; shortage of teachers; and the wrong assumption that a teacher can teach a language they speak. The recent delocalization policy being implemented by the TSC and lack of training of teachers in Mother Tongue are seen as great contributors to these challenges. Finally, the study revealed that in all the schools visited there were no instructional materials for mother tongue. The head teachers reported that KICD had not approved Kalenjin/Nandi dialect books for use of mother tongue. It was not clear when the books would be available for use in the schools. The respondents attributed as another great impediment to the implementation of mother tongue education in the area of study. This is because it affects content delivery.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study revealed that attitude of parents and other education stakeholders is a great barrier in the implementation of mother tongue education in Chesumei Sub County. The study revealed that most parents have a negative attitude towards use of mother tongue as a language of instruction in early childhood education. They think that this is backward. This finding is line with Baker's [3] findings, which acknowledged that attitude to a language, is particularly important in the learning process because it affects the outcomes of education. Baker [3] further states that attitude is considered as both input and output. For example, a favorable attitude to mathematics or to language learning may be a vital input in Maths or languages achievement. In this sense, attitude is predisposing factor or affecting the outcomes of education. Indeed, values and attitudes are some of the basic components of motivation in any given situation, language use included. Motivation in this case refers to what Keller [22] describes it as the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid and the degree of efforts they will exert in that respect.

The attitude of teachers was also found to affect the implementation of mother tongue education in Chesumei Sub County. This is because teachers are the ones who actually do the instruction in class and therefore crucial in the implementation of any educational program. This is in agreement with Omulando [22] who stated that the way teachers feel about the languages they are exposed to within the school setting influence how they use these languages during classroom instruction. How they use these languages, also influence how their learners use the languages. When an individual is confronted within more than one language, it leads to a consideration of linguistic attitudes of the individual (the attitude towards a language, the value placed on a language determines the way a language is received and used by individual or group of individuals. It can therefore be concluded that the higher the value of language, the warmer the reception and the more patronage of the

language the lower the value the colder the reception and the less patronage of the language [23]. Therefore, in relation to the languages teachers are exposed to evidence from past studies show that the value placed on English in relation to mother tongue by teachers has a bearing on the attitudes they have towards mother tongue and English [23]. Baker [3] points out that the status value and importance of a language is most often and most easily measured by attitudes of the language. In most cases, mother tongue is disregarded for its lack of instrumental motivations, while English is preferred for both its instrumental and integrative motivations [23]. The researcher supports the arguments by the above scholars that attitude greatly affects how a language is perceived.

In Kenya, English is given much value and therefore has a wider preference and use as compared to the local languages. Furthermore, there are teacher-related factors that affect the implementation of mother tongue education. In Chesumei Sub County, most of the teachers were found to be incompetent in mother tongue and therefore cannot be able to handle it. In particular, the delocalization of teachers is perceived to be a threat to the implementation of mother tongue education. This is because of the influx of teachers from different ethnic groups and who cannot be able to teach in language of the new school's catchment. This finding corresponds to the fact that one of the issues that predominates discussion on the effectiveness of L1-based systems is the ability of teachers to efficiently and effectively transmit cognitive skills and values in the learners; L1 [24]. However, most education systems that attempt to institute policies that encourage learning through a child home language suffer from an acute shortage of teachers who speak or have access to these home languages, yet one of the criteria for effective usage of local languages for instruction is that there must be enough teachers to teach in it [25, 26].

In addition, Benson [27] found that when teachers are not native speakers of a Child's LI or lack sufficient training on how to carry out mother tongue-based teaching, they avoid the unknown good and regress to the known bad. That is, teachers revert to old systems of teacher-controlled interactions, where pupils are merely required to repeat content after the teacher and given little room to ask any questions or express hesitations they may have. In L2 – dominant systems, this interaction characterizes all years of primary schooling, making the experience unpleasant for children. Bunyis [28] ethnographic study of Kenyan lessons showed that classroom interactions in an L2-dominant school are dominated by safe talk - where the teacher makes little demand on learners, encourages choral answers, repetition of phrases and copying of notes from chalkboards or textbooks, undermining efforts to bring up a new generation of teachers. When teaching becomes mechanical and stifling, pupils are likely to distance themselves from primary school as

soon as possible. Thus, without adequate support for an L1-based language policy, schools end up encouraging an orientation towards error-free regurgitation of curriculum content rather than the expression of ideas and interaction with new information [29].

The study also found out that even those teachers who hail from the local community might not be able to teach mother tongue in a class. As observed by Benson [27] this is another challenge that must be addressed as concerns teachers: the wrong assumption that if teachers can speak a child's LI then they can teach it, which makes education ministries lax about providing specific training for LI teachers. Benson [27] further, notes that without specific formal training on multilingual strategies and practices, instruction is likely to be ineffective. An editorial in Kenya's Daily Nation [30] notes primary school teachers, who undergo a two-year training course after completing their secondary education, are trained in over 10 subjects, which include all subjects taught in primary school plus professional pedagogical courses. Such a system can be ineffective as it fails to equip trainees with intensive, specialist knowledge in a few subjects and instead gives them a general idea about everything. This kind of training means that teachers lack the opportunity to gain the necessary competence and specific training in mother tongue-based teaching and how to use it as a bridge to competency in L2.

The ideal situation for a mother tongue-first education system is to identify teachers who are fluent in the language, familiar with the local culture and respected by others in the community [31]. In communities with an insufficient number of trained teachers, the use of community assistants - speakers of the local language who can receive some training to help trained teachers communicate curriculum content - can help bridge gaps between the teacher and learners. Also, as Young [31] avers I the documents of Malaysia, teachers who are speakers of the indigenous language can be trained in LI instruction and they can then train other teachers in their district or in the community, which enables continuous in-service training and builds up networks among multilingual teachers and the community. Training workshops for community assistants and LI teachers also provide an opportunity to enrich indigenous education as community members share their knowledge about the local language and culture, which can provide tutorial strategies, [46]. However, this has not been done in Chesumei Sub-County and which has made the implementation of mother tongue education to be very poor. Besides, the study revealed that there was a serious shortage of instructional materials in the selected schools in Chesumei Sub County. Reports from the Head teachers indicated that books to be used for Kalenjin and Nandi dialects in schools for mother tongue instruction have not been approved by Kenya institute of curriculum development (KICD). It was observed that the lack of

instructional materials in the selected schools hindered the transmission of content in local language. This finding conformed to the HEP Report [24], which noted that up until the 1980s many of the indigenous languages in Kenya did not have a written form. However, later attempts to provide reading materials have proved challenging as the issue of providing instructional materials in local languages is heavily influenced by donor interests, evangelical motives, strong economic interests from overseas publishing companies and global power relations [32-34].

## CONCLUSION

Mother tongue education is critical in the early school years. Therefore, concerted efforts by all the relevant stakeholders are key in ensuring that the implementation of mother tongue education becomes a success. The challenges currently facing its implementation must be ironed out through deliberate efforts spearheaded by the Ministry Of Education, alongside teachers and parents, among others, all of whom must lead in ensuring that mother tongue is fully entrenched in Kenya's education curriculum.

The researcher made the following recommendations at the end of the study: Teachers, parents, and other education stakeholders should be sensitized on the importance of Mother Tongue Education; The Ministry of Education must ensure implementation of the Language policy (LP) to the letter and schools found violating it taken stern action; Teachers should be trained on how best to handle Mother Tongue Education. In particular, trainee teachers should be taught pedagogical and other aspects mother tongue education while in colleges/ universities. In conclusion, Mother tongue education being critical in the early school years and concerted efforts by all the relevant stakeholders are key in ensuring that its implementation becomes a success. The challenges currently facing its implementation must be ironed out through deliberate efforts spearheaded by the Ministry Of Education, alongside teachers and parents, among others, all of whom must lead in ensuring that mother tongue is fully entrenched in Kenya's education curriculum.

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